

English and  
Communication  
**Literary Study Unit**  
**Seven Poems by Edwin Morgan**

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HIGHER STILL

# English and Communication

Literary Study Unit  
Seven Poems by Edwin Morgan

Support Materials



West Lothian Council  
Education Services



The Higher Still Development Programme gratefully acknowledges permission granted by Carcanet Press Ltd for 'Glasgow 5 March 1971', 'In the Snack Bar', 'Glasgow Green', 'King Billy', 'The Death of Marilyn Monroe', 'The First Men on Mercury' and 'Sobieski's Shield', all taken from *Collected Poems* by Edwin Morgan, published by Carcanet Press Ltd.

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## SECTION 1

### NOTES TO TEACHERS/LECTURERS

#### Introduction

The purpose of the pack is to introduce students to the poetry of Edwin Morgan. It is aimed at two levels, Intermediate 2 and Higher, and is designed to offer a wide degree of flexibility. The material prepares students for the Critical Essay by developing skills of analysis and critical response while integrating the teaching and assessment of Group Discussion. It is **not** designed to offer **practice** in Unseen Textual Analysis, although it would be perfectly appropriate to provide such practice for students by presenting them at (or towards) the end of their study of these poems with **another** Morgan poem (or a poem by another poet similar in theme to any of these poems).

#### Content

The pack introduces students to seven of Edwin Morgan's poems and aims to give a flavour of his work. The poems are divided into three sections:

Glasgow	Glasgow 5 March 1971 (Int. 2) In the Snack Bar (Int. 2) Glasgow Green (H)
Legends	King Billy (H) The Death of Marilyn Monroe (H)
Science Fiction	The First Men on Mercury (Int 2) In Sobieski's Shield (H)

Although students would gain from studying all the poems contained in the pack, it is likely that, for assessment purposes, those performing at Intermediate 2 will respond best to the texts marked (Int. 2) while those performing at Higher will benefit from the challenge of the texts marked (H).

The brief commentaries on each poem in section 7 are designed to supplement, not replace, direct teaching. The questions which follow the poems can be used to help students develop skills of textual analysis and create opportunities for practice and assessment of group discussion. Pages 10 and 14 of the pack contain notes to support Group Discussion and the Critical Essay respectively.

#### Group Discussion

Prior to beginning work on this pack, it is recommended that some teaching of the skills of Group Discussion has taken place. National Assessment Bank videotapes and commentaries provide a useful teaching and learning guide.

Groups should be organised so that they contain no fewer than four members.

## SECTION 2

### NOTES TO STUDENTS

#### Seven Poems by Edwin Morgan

##### *Aim*

The aim of this unit is to provide you with an introduction to the poems of Edwin Morgan.

##### *Objectives*

This unit will enable you to:

- know something about Edwin Morgan's life
- be aware of some of the major themes in Morgan's poetry
- understand the importance of language, structure, rhythm and rhyme
- have a detailed knowledge of seven of Morgan's poems
- analyse a selection of these poems in the context of group discussion
- use the material you have studied to write a critical essay as part of the assessment of the Higher Still English and Communication Literary Study Unit.

To help you to study the poems, they have been grouped under three headings. It should be noted, however, that *King Billy* could also be grouped under **Glasgow**.

##### **Glasgow**

*Glasgow 5 March 1971*  
*In the Snack-bar*  
*Glasgow Green*

##### **Legends**

*King Billy*  
*The death of Marilyn Monroe*

##### **Science Fiction**

*The First Men on Mercury*  
*In Sobieski's Shield*

All of the poems to be studied can be found in 'EDWIN MORGAN Selected Poems', published by Carcanet.



## **SECTION 3**

### **EDWIN MORGAN - A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Edwin Morgan was born in Glasgow on the 27th April 1920. He was brought up in Rutherglen on the outskirts of the city. He attended Rutherglen Academy until the age of fifteen and although a successful student, he was unhappy there. He sat bursary exams and completed his education at Glasgow High.

Morgan was greatly influenced by the period during which he grew up. The 1930s saw a period of economic depression and architectural change in Glasgow. The Empire Exhibition of 1938 heralded a future founded on science and engineering. In the years before the Second World War the city experienced a boom in housing and a move away from the elaborate traditional designs. The cinema contributed to his ideas of a city of the future. This had the effect of convincing Morgan that the future should be more than simply a perpetuation of the past.

He started Glasgow University in 1937. When he was called up for armed service in 1940, he initially registered as a Conscientious Objector but later changed his attitude, believing that there was no real alternative to war with Germany. His pacifist sympathies drove him to serve in the Royal Army Medical Corps and he spent the war in Egypt, Palestine and the Lebanon.

Morgan returned to Glasgow University in 1946 and graduated in 1947 with a first class Honours in English Language and English Literature. He accepted a lectureship in the Department of English at Glasgow University when he was twenty-seven.

His poetry began to be published and his early work reveals a troubled person. His poetry writing flourished in the early 1960s, gaining inspiration from a wide variety of sources, including the Russian modernists and the Portuguese and Brazilian concrete poets. His work, with its fascination with Glasgow and the city's determination to regenerate itself, became focused on the city streets.

Morgan's career has seen a catalogue of successes: international recognition, acclaimed publications, a host of literary awards, an OBE in 1982, the list goes on. He retired as Titular Professor in the Department of English in Glasgow University in 1980.

Although he has travelled widely (in 1985 he blew his Soros Translation Award prize money on a day trip to the North Pole on Concorde) he has chosen to continue to live in Glasgow.

## SECTION 4

### GLASGOW

In the first section we will examine three poems set in Glasgow, *Glasgow 5 March 1971*, *In The Snack Bar* and *Glasgow Green*. Edwin Morgan has been described as an urban poet and each of these poems deals with the reality of urban life. Morgan has said:

‘I began to write a number of poems.....presenting people in urban settings, especially Glasgow.....I began to bring more and more of the human life of the city into the centre of the picture, and for the first time I found that I both wanted to and was able to write immediately and directly about people whose lives might be different from mine but whose problems - or joys for that matter - I wanted to enter into and bring across in terms of poetry.’

One of Morgan’s concerns is that ‘honest’ poetry should deal with the world of its time, including life in the city streets. These poems are based on recognisable human situations.

#### *Glasgow 5 March 1971*

1. With a ragged diamond  
of shattered plate glass  
a young man and his girl  
are falling backwards into a shop window.
5. The young man’s face  
is bristling with fragments of glass  
and the girl’s leg has caught  
on the broken window  
and spurts arterial blood
10. over her wet - look white coat.  
Their arms are starfished out  
braced for impact,  
their faces show surprise, shock  
and the beginning of pain.
15. The two youths who have pushed them  
are about to complete the operation  
reaching into the window  
to loot what they can smartly.  
Their faces show no expression.
20. It is a sharp, clear night  
in Sauchiehall Street.  
In the background two drivers  
keep their eyes on the road.

This is one of Morgan’s *Instamatic Poems*. These poems can be seen as word photographs and are a way of ‘fixing’ snapshots of events from a particular period in time.

**Read the poem through at least twice and then use the following questions to explore it in detail. Do this on your own. This will give you some idea of what you will be required to do in the Unseen Textual Analysis part of the external examination. On this occasion, however, you should keep your answers fairly brief. This is not an Unseen Textual Analysis text! Be prepared to use your brief answers to contribute to a whole-class discussion of the poem; and be prepared also to expand your answers by writing down points raised by other students.**

1. Explain what actually happens in the poem.
2. What is the tone of the poem? How do language and structure contribute to the tone?
3. Show how the language of the first five lines helps to capture the reader's attention.
4. Compare the injuries sustained by the young man and his girlfriend.
  - a) Why is the metaphor 'bristling with fragments of glass' an effective way of describing the man's injuries?
  - b) How does the poet convey the severity of the girl's injuries?
5. 'Wet-look' was a term used to describe a type of raincoat fashionable in the early 1970s. Explain the irony of the lines:

'.....spurts arterial blood  
over her wet-look white coat.'
6. How do the lines:

Their arms are starfished out  
braced for impact,  
their faces show surprise, shock  
and the beginning of pain ...

contribute to the sense that this poem could be described as a 'word photograph'?
7. Quote two expressions which tell us about the attitude of the youths.
8. What is the significance of the last four lines of the poem?
9. Explain how the poet uses language and structure to convey the idea of a photograph.
10. What social comment is contained in this poem?

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **participating in Group Discussion**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

### *In the Snack-bar*

1. A cup capsizes along the formica,  
slithering with a dull clatter.  
A few heads turn in the crowded evening snack-bar.  
An old man is trying to get to his feet
5. from the low round stool fixed to the floor.  
Slowly he levers himself up, his hands have no power.  
He is up as far as he can get. The dismal hump  
looming over him forces his head down.  
He stands in his stained beltless gabardine
10. like a monstrous animal caught in a tent  
in some story. He sways slightly,  
his face not seen, bent down  
in shadow under his cap.  
Even on his feet he is staring at the floor
15. or would be, if he could see.  
I notice now his stick, once painted white  
but scuffed and muddy, hanging from his right arm.  
Long blind, hunchback born, half paralysed  
he stands
20. fumbling with his stick  
and speaks:  
'I want - to go to the - toilet.'
  
- It is down two flights of stairs, but we go.  
I take his arm. 'Give me - your arm - it's better,' he says.
25. Inch by inch we drift towards the stairs.  
A few yards of floor are like a landscape  
to be negotiated, in the slow setting out  
time has almost stopped. I concentrate  
my life to his: crunch of spilt sugar,
30. slidy puddle from the night's umbrellas,  
table edges, people's feet,  
hiss of the coffee-machine, voices and laughter,  
smell of a cigar, hamburgers, wet coats steaming,  
and the slow dangerous inches to the stairs.
35. I put his right hand on the rail  
and take his stick. He clings to me. The stick  
is in his left hand, probing the treads.  
I guide his arm and tell him the steps.  
And slowly we go down. And slowly we go down.
40. White tiles and mirrors at last. He shambles  
uncouth into the clinical gleam.  
I set him in position, stand behind him  
and wait with his stick.  
His brooding reflection darkens the mirror
45. but the trickle of his water is thin and slow,  
an old man's apology for living.  
Painful ages to close his trousers and coat -

- I do up the last buttons for him.  
 He asks doubtfully, 'Can I - wash my hands?'
50. I fill the basin, clasp his soft fingers round the soap.  
 He washes feebly, patiently. There is no towel.  
 I press the pedal of the drier, draw his hands  
 gently into the roar of the hot air.  
 But he cannot rub them together,
55. drags out a handkerchief to finish.  
 He is glad to leave the contraption, and face the stairs.  
 He climbs, and steadily enough.  
 He climbs, we climb. He climbs  
 with many pauses but with that one
60. persisting patience of the undefeated  
 which is the nature of man when all is said.  
 And slowly we go up. And slowly we go up.  
 The faltering, unfaltering steps  
 take him at last to the door
65. across that endless, yet not endless waste of floor.  
 I watch him helped on a bus. It shudders off in the rain.

- The conductor bends to hear where he wants to go.  
 Wherever he could go it would be dark  
 and yet he must trust men.
70. Without embarrassment or shame  
 he must announce his most pitiful needs  
 in a public place. No one sees his face.  
 Does he know how frightening he is in his strangeness  
 under his mountainous coat, his hands like wet leaves
75. stuck to the half-white stick?  
 His life depends on many who would evade him.  
 But he cannot reckon up the chances,  
 having one thing to do,  
 to haul his blind hump through these rains of August.
80. Dear Christ, to be born for this!

This poem was based on an encounter which really happened. In it, Morgan shows man as victim, yet celebrates the stubborn endurance, the indomitability of the human spirit. Unlike the detached tone of *Glasgow 5 March 1971*, Morgan enters this poem and empathises with the suffering of the old man.

### **Read the poem at least twice**

The task which follows requires you to analyse the poem through group discussion. This also provides you with an opportunity to develop your group discussion skills. Before you begin, it is important that you understand what makes for good group discussion and how you can go about improving your skills.

**Some advice on tackling Group Discussion**

- Think carefully about the topic being discussed.
- Make sure that the ideas and opinions you contribute are relevant to the topic and are backed up with evidence.
- Be clear and audible.
- Take account of what others have to say by expanding, supporting, refuting, agreeing, challenging, etc.
- Involve the other members of the group and encourage them to contribute.
- Make sure that you contribute readily but do not dominate the discussion.

**In groups, discuss the following points and be prepared to report back to the rest of the class on some of the answers you have reached agreement about**

1. Look at the first verse and identify how the poet arouses sympathy for the old man. You should refer to features such as vocabulary, structure and devices of language you think relevant.
2. In the second verse of the poem, Morgan empathises with the old man. Show how he conveys the slow and hazardous nature of the journey to the toilet.
3. How does the description of the incident in the toilet contribute to our understanding of the plight of the old man?
4. Examine how, in the second verse, Morgan develops a sense of the old man's determination.
5. In the last verse, Morgan moves beyond the incident in the snack-bar to examine the impact the old man's disabilities have on the quality of his life.
6. Show how the poet helps us to understand the problems faced by the old man and the effect that he has on others.
7. Explain the wider comment made by Morgan about the nature of human beings.
8. How does Morgan make effective use of contrast throughout the poem?
9. What is the tone of the last line of the poem?
10. Choose two features which you found particularly effective and explain how they contribute to your enjoyment of the poem.

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **participating in Group Discussion**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

### *Glasgow Green*

1. Clammy midnight, moonless mist.  
A cigarette glows and fades on a cough.  
Meth-men mutter on benches,  
pawed by river fog. Monteith Row
5. sweats coldly, crumbles, dies  
slowly. All shadows are alive.  
Somewhere a shout's forced out - 'No!' -  
it leads to nothing but silence,  
except the whisper of the grass
10. and the other whispers that fill the shadows.  
  
'What d'ye mean see me again?  
D'ye think I came here jist for that?  
I'm no finished with you yet.  
I can get the boys t'ye, they're no that faur away.
15. You wouldny like that eh? Look there's no two ways about it.  
Christ but I'm gaun to have you Mac  
if it takes all night, turn over you bastard  
turn over, I'll –  
Cut the scene.
20. Here there's no crying for help,  
it must be acted out, again, again.  
  
This is not the delicate nightmare  
you carry to the point of fear  
and wake from, it is life, the sweat
25. is real, the wrestling under a bush  
is real, the dirty starless river  
is the real Clyde, with a dishrag dawn  
it rinses the horrors of the night  
but cannot make them clean:
30. though washing blows  
where the women watch  
by day,  
and children run,  
on Glasgow Green.
35. And how shall these men live?  
Providence, watch them go!  
Watch them love, and watch them die!  
How shall the race be served?  
It shall be served by anguish
40. as well as by children at play.  
It shall be served by loneliness  
as well as by family love.  
It shall be served by hunter and hunted in their endless chain  
as well as by those who turn back the sheets in peace.

45. The thorn in the flesh!  
 Providence water it !  
 Do you think it is not watered?  
 Do you think it is not planted?  
 Do you think there is not a seed of the thorn
50. as there is also a harvest of the thorn?  
 Man, take in that harvest!  
 Help that tree to bear its fruit!  
 Water the wilderness, walk there, reclaim it!  
 Reclaim, regain, renew! Fill the barns and the vats!
55. Longing,  
 longing  
 shall find its wine.
- Let the women sit in the Green  
 and rock their prams as the sheets
60. blow and whip in the sunlight.  
 But the beds of married love  
 are islands in the sea of desire.  
 Its waves break here, in this park,  
 splashing the flesh as it trembles
65. like driftwood in the dark.

**Read the poem at least twice.**

This poem is more difficult to understand on a first reading than the other two studied so far because of its subtle use of imagery.

**In groups discuss the following questions which are designed to help you to understand and analyse the poem. You should make notes of your agreed answers, keeping in mind how you might use some (or all) of the notes you have made as the basis of a Critical Essay. Try to come up with the wording of a good Critical Essay Question which could be suitably answered through reference to the themes and techniques of this poem (or any of the other Morgan poems you have so far studied).**



1. Pick out as many features of language and structure as you can and explain what they contribute to the scene and mood in the first verse.
2. The majority of this poem is written in Standard English. Account for the poet's use of Glasgow dialect in the second verse. What effect does this have on the tone of this verse?
3. Look again at the third verse of the poem:

‘This is not the delicate nightmare .....  
... on Glasgow Green.’

- a) Explain the point Morgan is making in these lines.
  - b) Pick out two separate features of structure and show what each contributes to the effect of this verse.
4. a) What challenge does Morgan present at the start of the fourth verse?
  - b) What does the use of contrast contribute to the message contained in verse four?
  - c) How does the rhythm of this verse reinforce the theme?

Throughout the poem the poet makes use of liquid and water imagery.  
Give four examples of this and explain the significance of each.

5. In the last verse of the poem Morgan sums up the comment he is making about the human condition. Explain the message and show how he uses language to get his message across to the reader.

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **participating in Group Discussion**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

## FINAL TASK ON MORGAN'S GLASGOW POEMS

From the three poems you have studied choose one and write a critical essay in response to the following task:

*Many poems give us an insight into the less pleasant side of life. Choose one such poem and show, through detailed reference to the poem, how the poet's use of language and poetic technique, contribute to our understanding of its theme(s).*

### Some advice on tackling the Critical Essay question

- Read the question carefully and think about what you are being asked to do.
- Pick out the key words of the question:
  - *detailed reference* means that you must quote from the poem to back up the points you are making;
  - *language* means that you must consider the words and phrases used to convey the theme(s) of the poem;
  - *poetic technique* refers to imagery, personification, alliteration, assonance, repetition, verse form, rhythm, rhyme, etc.;
  - *theme* refers to the ideas or topics explored in the poem.
- Draw up a brief plan of how you are going to answer the question.
- Make sure that everything you say is relevant and is backed up with evidence from the poem.

1. **Begin** your essay by referring to the question, for example:

*A poem in which the language and use of poetic technique give us an insight into the less pleasant side of life is \_\_\_\_\_ by Edwin Morgan.*

2. **Go on** to identify and explain the main theme(s) of the poem, showing as you do so **how** specific features of language and poetic technique opened up your understanding of the theme(s).
3. **Conclude** by summing up the main ways in which the poem created an impact on you and gave you a fresh insight into the less pleasant side of life. By rounding off in this way you are showing that you have read and understood the question and that you are confident about the relevance of the comments you have made in your answer.

You should ensure that it is well structured and well expressed, revealing a clear and relevant line of thought which demonstrates that:

- your understanding of the text is secure
- your analysis is (accurate and) detailed
- your evaluation of the text is based firmly on (substantial and) detailed textual evidence.

## SECTION 5

### LEGENDS

There is a strong mediaeval influence at the core of much of Morgan's work where the heroic endeavour of man inspires his poetry. The two poems studied in this section, *King Billy* and *The Death of Marilyn Monroe* fall into this category.

*King Billy* provides a convenient link with the 'Glasgow Poems', highlighting the harsh reality of city life while celebrating humanity's indomitable determination to live life to the full. The poem examines the life of Billy Fullarton who led a gang of Protestant youths, known as 'The Brighton Billy Boys' in a deprived area of Glasgow in the 1920s and 1930s.

**Read the poem at least twice.**

#### *King Billy*

1. Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up,  
dragged their rain through the cemetery trees.  
The gates shone cold. Wind rose  
flaring the hissing leaves, the branches
5. swung, heavy, across the lamps.  
Gravestones huddled in drizzling shadow,  
flickering streetlight scanned the requiescats.  
a name and an urn, a date and a dove  
picked out, lost, half regained.
10. What is this dripping wreath, blown from its grave  
red, white, blue, gold  
'To Our Leader of Thirty years Ago' -  
  
Bareheaded, in dark suits, with flutes  
and drums, they brought him here, in procession
15. seriously, King Billy of Brighton, dead,  
from Bridgeton Cross: a memory of violence,  
brooding days of empty bellies,  
billiard smoke and a sour pint,  
boots or fists, famous sherrickings,
20. the word, the scuffle, the flash, the shout,  
bloody crumpling in the close,  
bricks for papish windows, get  
the Conks next time, the Conks ambush  
the Billy Boys, the Billy Boys the Conks till
25. Sillitoe scuffs the razors down the stank  
it isn't the violence they remember  
but the legend of a violent man  
born poor, gang-leader in the bad times  
of idleness and boredom, lost in better days,
30. a bouncer in a betting club,

- a quiet man at last, dying  
alone in Bridgeton in a box bed.  
So a thousand people stopped the traffic  
for the hearse of a folk hero and the flutes  
35. threw 'Onward Christian Soldiers' to the winds  
from unironic lips, the mourners kept  
in step in step and there were some who wept.

- Go from the grave. The shrill flutes  
are silent, the march dispersed.  
40. Deplore what is to be deplored  
and then find out the rest.

**Now, on your own, answer the following questions**

1. Choose two of the following and explain how they contribute to the scene and mood of the first verse:
  - i) 'Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up  
dragged their rain through the cemetery trees.'
  - ii) '...Wind rose  
flaring the hissing leaves, the branches  
swung, heavy, across the lamps.'
  - iii) 'Gravestones huddled in drizzling shadow'
2. In what way does the structure of the first four lines of the second verse add solemn dignity to the scene?
3. By referring closely to the text, show how the poet conveys the poverty and violence of King Billy's background.
4. What does the structure of lines 19-24 contribute to Morgan's description of the street fight?
5. Explain the metaphor 'Sillitoe scuffs the razors down the stank' and show why it is effective.
6. Look again at lines 28-32.
  - i) What social comment is the poet making in lines 28-29?
  - ii) How does Morgan arouse sympathy for King Billy?

7. Explain the meaning of the following lines:

‘... the flutes  
threw ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’ to the winds  
from unironic lips ...’

8. With reference to the poem as a whole, show how the poet uses language to give a sense of time and place.

9. Explain the challenge presented to the reader in the last two lines of the poem.

10. You may have found certain features of this poem unusual and/or thought-provoking. Select any feature which struck you in this way and discuss how it contributes to any impact the poem may have had on you.

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

## **The Death of Marilyn Monroe**

*The Death of Marilyn Monroe* examines the circumstances surrounding the death of the American screen goddess. Her death in 1962, from a drugs overdose, shocked the world, coming at a time when she appeared to have everything - beauty, wealth and success. She represented the American Dream: the small-town girl-next-door turned Hollywood sex icon. Her name was linked to the rich and famous: she was married to Joe Di Maggio, the famous American baseball player, and the playwright Arthur Miller; she was rumoured to have had affairs with many men, including President John F. Kennedy and his brother Senator Bobby Kennedy. Her death was shrouded in mystery; the world's press, in time-honoured fashion, clamoured to apportion blame and even today there is much conjecture about who or what pushed her to her death.

### **Read the poem at least twice**

#### ***The Death of Marilyn Monroe***

1. What innocence? Whose guilt? What eyes? Whose breast?  
Crumpled orphan, nembatal bed,  
white hearse, Los Angeles,  
Di Maggio! Los Angeles! Miller! Los Angeles! America!
5. That Death should seem the only protector -  
That all arms should have faded, and the great cameras and lights  
become an inquisition and a torment -  
That the many acquaintances, the autograph hunters, the  
inflexible directors, the drive-in admirers should become
10. a blur of incomprehension and pain -  
That lonely Uncertainty should limp up, grinning, with  
bewildering barbiturates, and watch her undress and lie  
down and in her anguish  
call for him! Call for him to strengthen her with what could only
15. dissolve her! A method  
of dying, we are shaken, we see it. Strasberg!  
Los Angeles! Olivier! Los Angeles! Others die  
and yet by this death we are a little shaken, we feel it,  
America.
20. Let no one say communication is a cantword.  
They had to lift her hand from the bedside telephone.  
But what she had not been able to say  
perhaps she had said. 'All I had was my life.  
I have no regrets, because if I made
25. any mistakes, I was responsible.  
There is now - and there is the future.  
What has happened is behind. So  
it follows you around? So what?' - This  
to a friend, ten days before.
30. And so she was responsible.  
And if she was not responsible, not wholly responsible, Los  
Angeles? Los Angeles? Will it follow you around? Will the  
slow white hearse of the child of America follow you around?

**Now, in groups answer the following discussion points. You should take notes of your answers.**

1. In your opinion, who is speaking the opening line of the poem? What effect did this line have on you?
2. Account for the poet's use of exclamation marks in the fourth line of the poem.
3. Explain how the poet makes use of language and structure to change the tone of the next ten lines.
4. 'Uncertainty' is personified.
  - i) How does this affect your perception of Marilyn Monroe's control over her life?
  - ii) By referring to the text, show how other factors influence her state of mind.
5. Explain how the context helps you to understand what the poet means when he says:

'Let no one say communication is a cantword.'
6. What is the effect of the word 'perhaps' in the lines:

'But what she had not been able to say  
perhaps she had said.'
7. What was Marilyn Monroe's attitude to life?
8. Look again at the last four lines of the poem.
  - i) Describe the tone of the line:

'And so she was responsible.'
  - ii) Where does Morgan believe that responsibility for Monroe's death lies?
9. Compare and contrast the opening and closing lines of the poem.

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **participating in Group Discussion**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

## **FINAL TASK ON MORGAN'S LEGEND POEMS**

From what you have so far learned about group discussion and in the light of your own response to *King Billy* and *The Death of Marilyn Monroe*, discuss in your group which of these two poems was more effective in creating a sense of tragic loss in the death of a legend.



## SECTION 6

### SCIENCE FICTION

Morgan's interest in mediaeval poetry and his love of change are the basis for his interest in science fiction where he sees space exploration as part of mankind's heroic endeavour. Unlike poets such as Edwin Muir who called for mankind to cast aside technology and retreat to the world of nature, Morgan believes that machines are a fundamental part of our modern environment and that the endless possibilities of science should be explored. His vision of the future is optimistic and reflects this conviction that we need to embrace change. The theme of change is central to the two poems studied in this section, *The First Men on Mercury* and *In Sobieski's Shield*.

#### *The First Men on Mercury*

1. We come in peace from the third planet.  
Would you take us to your leader?  
  
Bawer stretter! Bawer. Bawer. Stretterhawl?
5. This a little plastic model  
of the solar system, with working parts.  
You are here and we are there and we  
are now here with you, is this clear?  
  
Gawl horrop. Bawr. Abawrhannahanna!
10. Where we come from is blue and white  
with brown, you see we call the brown  
here 'land', the blue is 'sea', and the white  
is 'clouds' over land and sea, we live  
on the surface of the brown land,  
all round is sea and clouds. We are 'men'.
15. Men come -  
  
Glawp men! Gawrbenner menko. Menhawl?  
  
Men come in peace from the third planet  
which we call 'earth'. We are earthmen.  
Take us earthmen to your leader.
20. Thmen? Thmen? Bawr. Bawrhossop.  
Yuleeda tan hanna. Harrabost yuleeda.  
  
I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,  
we carry no benner, we come in peace.  
The spaceways are all stretterhawn.
25. Glawn peacemen all horrabhanna tantko!

Tan come at'mstrossop. Glawp yuleeda!

Atoms are peacegawl in our harraban.  
Menbat worrabost fron tan hannahanna.

30. You men we know bawrhossopant. Bawr.  
We know yuleeda. Go stawg backspetter quick.

We cantantabawer, tantingko backspetter now!

Banghapper now! Yes, third planet back!  
Yuleeda will go back blue, white brown  
nowhanna! There is no more talk.

35. Gawl han fasthapper?

No. You must go back to your planet.  
Go back in peace, take what you have gained  
but quickly.

Stretterworra gawl, gawl...

40. Of course, but nothing is ever the same,  
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.

**Read the poem at least twice and, in groups, consider the following points.**

1. What exactly is happening in the poem?
2. Explain the different attitudes of the two speakers.
3.
  - i) Describe the tone of the poem.
  - ii) How is this achieved?
4. What is the moral of the poem?

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- writing a Critical Essay
- participating in Group Discussion
- tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.

### *In Sobieski's Shield*

1. well the prophets were dancing in the end much  
good it did them and the sun didn't rise at all  
anywhere but we weren't among the frozen we had been  
dematerialised the day before solar withdrawal
5. in a hurry it's true by the best technique  
who said only technique well anyhow the best  
available and here we are now rematerialized  
to the best of my knowledge on a minor planet  
of a sun in Sobieski's Shield in our right mind I hope
10. approximately though not unshaken and admittedly  
not precisely those who set out if one can  
speak of it by that wellworn tellurian euphemism  
in any case molecular reconstitution is no  
sinecure even with mice and I wouldn't have been
15. utterly surprised if some of us had turned out  
mice or worse
- but at least not that or not yet the effects  
of violent change are still slightly present an  
indescribable stringent sensation like perhaps being
20. born or dying but no neither of these I am  
very nearly who I was I see I have only  
four fingers on my left hand and there's a sharp  
twinge I never had in my knee and one most curious  
I almost said birthmark and so it is in a sense
25. light brown shaped like a crazy heart spreading  
across my right forearm well let it be we are  
here my wife my son the rest of the laboratory  
my wife has those streaks of fiery red in her  
hair that is expected in women she looks very
30. frightened yet and lies rigid the materialization  
is slow in her but that is probably better yes  
her eyes flutter to mine questioning I nod can I  
smile I think I can does she see me yes thank god  
she is hardly altered apart from that extraordinarily
35. strange and beautiful crown of bright red hair  
I draw her head into my arms and hide the sobbing  
shuddering first breaths of her second life I don't  
know what made me use that phrase who are we  
if we are not who we were we have only
40. one life though we are huddled now in our  
protective dome on this harsh metallic plain  
that belches cobalt from its craters under a  
white-bronze pulsing gong of a sun it was all  
they could do for us light-years away it seemed suitable
45. dematerialization's impossible over short distances anyway  
so let's start moving I can surely get onto my feet  
yes hoy there

- my son is staring fascinated at my four fingers  
 you've only one nipple I tell him and it's true  
 50. but for compensation when he speaks his boy's  
 treble has broken and at thirteen he is a man  
 what a limbo to lose childhood in where has  
 it gone between the throwing of a switch and these  
 alien hills across so many stars his blue eyes  
 55. are the same but there's a new graveness of the  
 second life that phrase again we go up together  
 to the concave of the dome the environment after all  
 has to be studied
- is that a lake of mercury I can't quite see  
 60. through the smoke of the fumarole it's lifting now  
 but there's something puzzling even when I  
 my memory of mercury seems to be confused with  
 what is it blood no no mercury's not like blood  
 what then what is it I'm remembering or nearly  
 65. remembering look dad mercury he says and so it  
 must be but I see a shell-hole filled with rain-water  
 red in the sinking sun I know that landscape too  
 one of the wars far back twentieth century I think the  
 great war was it called France Flanders fields I remember  
 70. reading these craters waterlogged with rain mud blood  
 I can see a stark hand brandishing nothing through placid scum  
 in a lull of the guns what horror that the livid water  
 is not shaken by the pity of the tattoo on the dead arm  
 a heart still held above the despair of the mud  
 75. my god the heart on my arm my second birth mark  
 the rematerialization has picked up these fragments I have  
 a graft of war and ancient agony forgive  
 me my dead helper
- the sulky pool of mercury stares back at me I am  
 80. seeing normally now but I know these flashes will return  
 from the far past times I gather my wife and son to me  
 with a fierce gesture that surprises them I am not  
 a demonstrative man yet how to tell them  
 what and who I am that we are bound to all that lived  
 85. though the barriers are unspeakable we know a little of that  
 but something what is it gets through it is not  
 an essence but an energy how it pierces how it  
 clutches for still as I run my hand through her  
 amazing hair streaming on my shoulder I feel

90. a fist shaken in a shell-hole turn in my very marrow  
 we shall live in the rings of this chain the jeremiahs  
 who said nothing human would stand are confounded if I cry  
 even the dry tear in my heart that I cannot  
 stop or if laugh to think they thought they
95. could divide the indivisible the old moon's in  
 the new moon's arms let's take our second  
 like our first life out from the dome are the suits  
 ready the mineral storm is quieter it's hard  
 to go let's go.

**Read the poem at least twice.**

**In groups discuss the following questions. You should make notes of your conclusions.**

1. This is an example of a science fiction narrative poem - a poem which tells a story. Describe what you imagine were the events leading up to the point when the reader joins the action of the poem.
2. Briefly outline what happens in the poem.
3. Explain the devices used by the poet to involve the reader.
4. How are the man, his wife and his son physically changed by the dematerialization and rematerialization process?
5. By referring closely to the text, explain the man's attitude to his wife and son?
6. The man describes his wife's 'first breaths of her second life'. Explain what he means by this and show how he continues this idea in the rest of the poem.
7. By examining the fourth verse, explain what the following lines (75-78) contribute to your understanding of the theme of the poem:

‘my god the heart on my arm my second birth mark  
 the rematerialization has picked up these fragments I have  
 a graft of war and ancient agony forgive  
 me my dead helper ...’

8. How does the context of the last verse help you to understand the metaphor:

‘... the old moon's in  
 the new moon's arms ...’?

9. Show how the poem succeeds in conveying a sense of the man's courage and resilience.

10. What does the shift from ‘the end’ of the first line of the poem to the ‘let’s go’ of its last line suggest about the message of the poem?
11. One of the poem’s most striking features is the fact that it is unpunctuated. Why, in your opinion, did the poet choose to structure the poem in this way?
12. Show how this poem contributes to your understanding of Morgan’s attitude to change and his optimistic view of the future.

**NB What you have done with this poem may help you prepare for:**

- **writing a Critical Essay**
- **participating in Group Discussion**
- **tackling Unseen Textual Analysis.**

### **FINAL TASK ON MORGAN’S SCIENCE FICTION POEMS**

From what you have so far learned about the strengths and weaknesses of your own participation in Group Discussion and in the light of your own response to *The First Men in Mercury* and/or *In Sobieski’s Sheild*, discuss in your group Morgan’s qualities as a writer of science fiction poems.

### **FINAL TASK ON ALL OF THE MORGAN POEMS YOU HAVE STUDIED.**

Write a Critical Essay in response to the following task:

*Many memorable poems leave the reader with a powerful impression of a person, a place or an era. From the poems you have studied, choose one which has left you with such an impression and explain what techniques are used by the poet to convey this impression.*

## SECTION 7

### BRIEF COMMENTARIES ON THE POEMS

It must be emphasised that the following commentaries are designed **only** to suggest to teachers/lecturers some possible readings of the poems which they may find useful in discussion with their students. They are **not** designed to be used as handouts.

#### **Glasgow 5 March 1971**

The poem describes an incident in a Glasgow street when a young couple are pushed backwards through a shop window by two youths who are intent on robbing the shop. The poem goes on to describe the attitude of the youths and of the other people who are in the vicinity at the time.

The poem is written in the present tense and the structure is reminiscent of a photograph with a foreground (the couple falling through the window), a middle ground (the youths preparing to loot the shop) and a background (the drivers in the area at the time). It opens with the destruction of a plate glass window as a young couple fall through it. The poet uses onomatopoeia, 'shattered plate glass', to convey the sound made by the breaking glass. He goes on to describe the injuries sustained by the couple. The metaphor 'bristling with fragments of glass' effectively compares the tiny pieces of glass embedded in the man's face with stubble. The girl's injuries are far more serious. Her leg is 'caught' on the glass and 'spurts arterial blood'. Ironically her 'wet-look white coat' is now literally wet with blood.

The poem moves on to describe the youths who pushed the couple. For them, this is part of a day's work - they are 'about to complete the operation'. Their lack of concern for the couple is shown in the line 'Their faces show no expression'.

There are people in the vicinity who could help the couple. The poet tells us that the visibility at the time is very good, 'It is a sharp, clear night'. The fact that the drivers 'keep their eyes on the road' shows us that they make a conscious effort not to become involved.

*Glasgow 5 March 1971* gives us an insight into the violent reality of inner city life. A sense of objectivity is created because the poet himself does not appear in the poem.

#### **In the Snack-bar**

Morgan has stated that *In the Snack-bar* 'came out of something that actually happened'. It deals with an encounter with an old disabled man in a busy snack-bar. The poem explores the extent of the old man's disabilities, the effect they have on his life and society's attitude to the disabled.

The poem's dramatic opening captures the reader's attention:

'A cup capsizes along the formica  
slithering with a dull clatter.'

The alliterative use of the letter 'c' conveys the hard sound of the cup as it clatters across the table. The contrast between the 'few heads' which turn in response to the noise and the fact that the snack-bar is 'crowded' is the first indication of society's lack of care for other people. The rest of the first verse is devoted to revealing the full extent of the old man's disabilities through the eyes of an outsider observing the incident. The first indication of the old man's plight is revealed in the words 'trying to get to his feet'. We soon learn that 'his hands have no power' and the dominating effect that his disability has on his life is revealed through the use of transferred epithet, suggesting that there is no respite:

'... the dismal hump  
looming over him forces his head down.'

The old man is described as an 'oddity', in some way sub-human:

'... a monstrous animal caught in a tent  
in some story.'

The use of the word 'caught' suggests that he is a prisoner of his disability, unable to shake himself free. We learn that his 'face is not seen', a point which is reinforced in the last verse when we are reminded that 'No one sees his face'. The fact that his identity is unknown conveys the loneliness of the old man's situation, and the idea that this man can be seen as being representative of those unfortunate enough to be disabled in today's society. The first verse draws to a close by summing up his disabilities:

'Long blind, hunchback born, half paralysed'

and ends with his having to announce to a room full of unseen strangers:

'I want to - go to the - toilet.'

The use of dashes conveys the hesitancy of the old man's speech.

In the long second verse Morgan enters the poem and empathises with the old man. This has the effect of generating understanding and compassion in the reader. The poet shows how a relatively short walk can be a long and difficult journey for someone with disability:

'A few yards of floor are like a landscape  
to be negotiated'

Repetition is used to convey the slowness of their progress down the stairs to the toilet:

'And slowly we go down. And slowly we go down.'

and again on the way back up:

'And slowly we go up. And slowly we go up.'



The poet's ability to imagine the situation from the old man's point of view deepens our understanding of his life:

'... I concentrate  
my life to his: crunch of spilt sugar,  
slidy puddle from the night's umbrellas,  
table edges, people's feet,  
hiss of the coffee-machine, voices and laughter,  
smell of a cigar, hamburger, wet coats steaming,  
and the slow dangerous inches to the stairs.'

Once in the toilet, the contrast between the pristine orderliness of the 'White tiles and mirrors' and the man as he:

'... shambles  
uncouth into the clinical gleam ...'

highlights not only his physical deformity, but also how dirty and neglected he is. The reality of his indignity is intensified as he is described as he urinates:

'... the trickle of his water is thin and slow,  
an old man's apology for living.'

Actions which most people take for granted as part of their daily routine create serious difficulties for him and he has to rely on a complete stranger to help him fulfil these basic tasks. The wash basin has to be filled for him; the poet has to 'clasp his soft fingers round the soap'. He is described as washing 'feebly, patiently' which, while reinforcing his weakness, also introduces his determination.

This determined effort to survive is the focus of the remainder of the second verse. The rhythm of the lines:

'He climbs, and steadily enough.  
He climbs, we climb. He climbs'

conveys a sense of movement as they slowly climb the stairs. Morgan at this point uses the old man's stubborn determination to make a wider comment about the endurance of the human spirit. He displays:

'... that one  
persisting patience of the undefeated  
which is the nature of man when all is said.'

This is further reinforced through the use of paradox:

'The faltering, unfaltering steps  
take him to the door  
across that endless, yet not endless waste of floor.'

Although physically the man's steps falter, he is unfaltering in his resolve to keep going.

In the final verse, Morgan draws back to explore the old man's situation. He contrasts the darkness of his blind world with the fact that he 'must trust men'. Compassion is aroused when the reader is confronted with the indignity of his daily life:

'Without embarrassment or shame  
he must announce his most pitiful needs  
in a public place'

and his vulnerability in a society which would prefer to pretend that he does not exist:

'His life depends on many who would evade him.'

The poem draws to a close by summing up the painful reality of the old man's life:

'... he cannot reckon up the chances,  
having one thing to do,  
to haul his blind hump through these rains of August.'

The compassionate indignation of Morgan's last line:

'Dear Christ, to be born for this!'

leaves the reader sympathising with the old man, admiring his determination and questioning society's treatment of the disabled.

### **Glasgow Green**

This poem deals with the darker side of Glasgow city life. By focusing on the outcasts of society and confronting the reader with the violence of homosexual rape, Morgan examines the loneliness of the human condition.

The first verse establishes a scene of darkness and oppressive squalor. References like 'Clammy midnight', 'Meth-men ... pawed by river fog' and 'Monteith Row sweats coldly' introduce a sense of sordid sexuality. Threatening undercurrents pervade this verse, 'All shadows are alive' and 'Somewhere a shout's forced out - 'No!' -'

In the second verse the poet uses Glaswegian dialect to convey the violent reality of homosexual rape through the words of the rapist:

'Christ but I'm gaun to have you Mac  
if it takes all night, turn over you bastard  
turn over ...'

Morgan uses repetition to drive home the point that we have to face up to the fact that this is part of life:

‘... it is life, the sweat  
is real, the wrestling under a bush  
is real, the dirty starless river  
is the real Clyde.’

The poet contrasts the ‘horrors of the night’ in the park beside the ‘dirty starless river’ with the clean washing women hang in the park by day and the children playing happily. The structure of the last lines of this verse conveys the swinging motion of the washing as it blows in the wind:

‘... though washing blows  
where the women watch  
by day,  
and children run,  
on Glasgow Green.’

Having presented us with the sordid reality of life among the city’s outcasts, Morgan challenges the conventional reaction of revulsion towards this behaviour and poses the question, ‘And how shall these men live?’ He contrasts the comfort and happiness of traditional family life with the misery and loneliness of the city’s derelicts:

‘How shall the race be served?  
It shall be served by anguish  
as well as by children at play.  
It shall be served by loneliness  
as well as by family love.  
It shall be served by hunter and hunted in their endless chain  
as well as those who turn back the sheets in peace.’

Water imagery is intricately woven with biblical allusion in this verse. These outcasts are ‘The thorn in the flesh’ of society. Water is essential for life and is traditionally seen as a symbol of fertility. Morgan continues with a number of rhetorical questions:

‘Do you think it (the thorn) is not watered?  
Do you think it is not planted?  
Do you think there is not a seed of the thorn  
as there is also a harvest of the thorn?’

Taken to its conclusion, water, the ‘sea of desire’ of the last verse, is a fundamental part of human life and society’s outcasts, the thorns, are driven by the same desires as the rest of humanity. Morgan makes a powerful plea for the life-giving properties of water to save these people from their lives of desolation:

‘Water the wilderness, walk there, reclaim it!’

This verse ends with a clear biblical reference to the miracle of changing water into wine:

‘Longing,  
longing  
shall find its wine.’

The last verse of the poem sums up its message. The poet describes the married women as they ‘rock their prams’ and watch their ‘sheets blow and whip in the sunlight’. They are lucky, their conventional lives are clean and comfortable ‘islands in a sea of desire’. The rhythm of the last verse, with its stress on the first syllable of each line, suggests the ebb and flow of the waves. The park can be seen as a microcosm of humanity where:

‘Its (the sea’s) waves break ...  
splashing the flesh as it trembles  
like driftwood through the dark.’

The poem presents us with a challenge. Condemnation is easy. We can retreat into our comfortable sanitised worlds and pretend that these people do not exist. However Morgan’s message is clear. All of human life is valuable and we must face the fact that society’s outcasts, however unpalatable their lives may seem, are an essential part of human life.

### **King Billy**

The opening verse of the poem creates the cinematographic effect of a camera panning the area of Riddrie then gradually zooming in on the graveyard to finally focus on the wreath. This verse establishes a mood of oppressive melancholy which suits the subject matter. Grey, metallic colours dominate, adding to the atmosphere of cold misery:

‘Grey over Riddrie the clouds piled up  
dragged their rain through the cemetery trees.’

This gives the impression of clouds so heavy with water that they have to be ‘dragged’ across the sky. This sense of desolation is further developed through Morgan’s use of assonance, ‘The gates shone cold’. Enjambement is used to create the effect of the branches swaying in the wind:

‘... Wind rose  
flaring the hissing leaves, the branches  
swung, heavy across the lamps.’

Through the use of personification, 'Gravestones huddled in drizzling shadow', the poet suggests that the weather is so cold and miserable that even the gravestones crowd together in a futile attempt to keep warm. The rhythm of the lines:

'a name and an urn, a date, a dove  
picked out, lost, half regained.'

conveys the 'flickering' effect of the streetlight. The verse ends by introducing the brightly coloured wreath and with it the enigma:

'What is this dripping wreath, blown from its grave  
red, white, blue and gold  
'To Our Leader of Thirty years Ago' - '

The long second verse begins by flashing back to the funeral. Inversion is used in the opening lines to focus attention on the respectful dignity of the mourners. These lines are broken up by commas to create the slow rhythm of the funeral march and the identity of the deceased is revealed:

'Bareheaded, in dark suits, with flutes  
and drums, they brought him here, in procession  
seriously, King Billy of Brighton, dead,  
from Bridgeton Cross ...'

The presence of the 'flutes and drums', the 'red, white, blue and gold' of the wreath and the name 'King Billy' firmly establish the subject's links with the Orange Order.

The poem now flashes further back to examine King Billy's life in the 1930s. Alliteration of the letter 'b' contributes to the build up of an atmosphere of poverty and growing resentment which inevitably erupts in violence:

'... brooding days of empty bellies,  
billiard smoke and a sour pint,  
boots or fists, famous sherrickings,'

Commas are again used to break up the lines but this time to convey the speed with which an argument can turn to violence:

'... the word, the scuffle, the flash, the shout,  
bloody crumpling in the close... '

Morgan uses repetition to show the relentless cyclical nature of the fighting between the rival Protestant and Catholic gangs:

'... get  
the Conks next time, the Conks ambush  
the Billy Boys, the Billy Boys the Conks ...'

The alliterative use of the letter 's' in the metaphor, 'Sillitoe scuffs the razors down the stank' conveys the speed and efficiency with which Sir Percy Sillitoe, the Chief Constable, put an end to the gang fights. The use of the Glaswegian dialect in the word 'stank' gives a sense of place.

Having acted as reporter, the role of the poet now changes and his voice enters the poem to comment directly on the people and events. We are told that the mourners are there not to remember the violence of life in the 1920s and 1930s:

'... but the legend of a violent man  
born poor, gang-leader in the bad times  
of idleness and boredom... '

King Billy is remembered because in times of deprivation he was not defeated by his environment and had something to offer the people. However, when conditions improved, he was not longer needed and was 'lost in better days'. While people's lives moved on, Billy's remained in the past; any employment he gained was dependent on violence. He became 'a bouncer in a betting club' and his life ended, where it began, in Bridgeton:

'a quiet man at last, dying  
alone in Bridgeton in a box bed.'

The poet juxtaposes the idea of King Billy 'dying alone' with the 'thousand people' who turned out in memory of 'a folk hero'. The poet highlights the irony of the mourners playing a Christian song at the funeral of a man whose life was devoted to violence:

'... the flutes  
threw 'Onward Christian Soldiers' to the winds  
from unironic lips... '

However the words 'unironic lips' show that the people themselves do not see the irony in what they are doing.

The last verse draws back from the funeral and leaves the reader with a challenge:

'Deplore what is to be deplored  
and then find out the rest.'

We are asked to condemn the violence but to examine what happens in society to create a need for leaders like Billy Fullarton.

## **The Death of Marilyn Munroe**

The poem opens dramatically, with a clamour of questions echoing public reaction to the news of Monroe's death. This has the effect of highlighting to the reader that the poem will be exploring the themes of responsibility and innocence:

‘What innocence? Whose guilt? What eyes? Whose breast?’

In contrast, the second and third lines slow the pace and introduce a sense of compassion:

‘Crumpled orphan, nembatal bed  
white hearse, Los Angeles’

The metaphor ‘crumpled orphan’ creates an image of her innocence while painting a picture of a person broken down by the demands of the life she led. The idea of her child-like innocence is continued in the phrase ‘white hearse’, since this is usually associated with the death of a child

The pace accelerates in the next line with a series of outbursts, punctuated by exclamation marks, which point the finger at areas of Monroe's life which contributed to her destruction:

‘Di Maggio! Los Angeles! Miller! Los Angeles! America!’

By using repetition, the poet is emphasising the key part ‘Los Angeles’ (and therefore the American film industry) had in her death.

Ironically, ‘Death’ is described as ‘the only protector’, suggesting a life so intolerable that death is seen as a welcome release. A tone of melancholy is created through the use of assonance:

‘That all arms should have faded’

and the poet goes on to show how the ‘great cameras and lights’, basic tools of the film industry, have become instruments of torture, ‘an inquisition and a torment’. A picture of her life of loneliness is built up. The people who surround her are there because of her name, not because they are her friends. We learn that she has ‘many acquaintances’ and that ‘autograph hunters’ pursue her. This sense of emotional isolation is conveyed most effectively in Morgan's description of the ‘drive-in admirers’ who are literally separated from the real person by two screens, the movie screen and the car windscreen.

By personifying 'Uncertainty', Morgan succeeds in not only intensifying the sense of her insecurity and confusion, but also in introducing the idea that Monroe is no longer in control of her life. 'Uncertainty' is portrayed as a sleazy voyeur, preying on her pain and naivete while luring her to her death:

'That lonely Uncertainty should limp up, grinning, with  
bewildering barbiturates, and watch her undress and lie  
down and in her anguish  
call for him! Call for him to strengthen her with what could only  
dissolve her!'

Her death has a theatrical quality to it:

'... A method  
of dying, we are shaken, we see it. Strasberg!'

This refers to Lee Strasberg's particularly stylised 'method' acting, studied by Marilyn Monroe.

The poet himself enters the poem, reminding us that in a world almost desensitised to death, this one is different; it touches us.

'Others die  
and yet by this death we are a little shaken, we feel it ,  
America!'

Morgan goes on to comment more directly on her death. He begins by emphasising the importance of communication in people's lives:

'Let no one say communication is a cantword.  
They had to lift her hand from the bedside telephone.'

She died trying to reach out to someone.

By reporting directly Monroe's words 'to a friend, ten days before', Morgan gives us an insight into her attitude towards life. For Monroe, all that mattered was the present and the future. She was a person who lived life to the full and regretted nothing:

'... All I had was my life.  
I have no regrets, because if I made  
and mistakes, I was responsible.  
There is now - and there is the future.  
What has happened is behind. So  
it follows you around? So what?... '



There is a strong sense irony in Morgan's short line:

‘And so she was responsible’

which prepares the reader for his hard-hitting concluding lines. The poem ends, as it begins, with a series of questions, focusing on responsibility and innocence:

‘And if she was not responsible, not wholly responsible, Los Angeles? Los Angeles? Will it follow you around?’

By repeating the words of Marilyn Monroe in what is a rhetorical question, the reader is forced to see that while Monroe was willing to accept responsibility for her life, Los Angeles (and American society in general) is unwilling to accept any responsibility for the part it played in her death. By repeating the image of the ‘white hearse’ the idea of Monroe's innocence is reinforced. This is further strengthened by the metaphor ‘child of America’ which encapsulates the themes of the poem and points the finger of blame firmly at American society. Monroe was in every sense a ‘child of America’, born in America, produced by the American film industry and possessing a child-like innocence which persisted throughout her career. The metaphor also contains an implied sense of parental responsibility on the part of American society, and the reader is left with the feeling that ‘Mother America’ has abdicated all responsibility for her child.

*The Death of Marilyn Monroe* serves to remind the reader of the price paid by the private person for living life to the full in the public eye.

### **The First Men on Mercury**

The poem opens with an English speaking astronaut encountering aliens from the planet Mercury. Morgan has created a Mercurian language which by implication is seen as socially inferior by the self important earthling. As the poem progresses the two languages come together and are exchanged. Much of the humour in the poem comes from the interplay of the two languages. The poem ends with the Earthmen speaking Mercurian while the Mercurians communicate in fluent English. The astronaut begins with a cliched formal greeting reflecting his sense of superiority:

‘We come in peace from the third planet.  
Would you take us to your leader?’

which is a sharp contrast to the sound of the Mercurian's response:

‘Bawr stretter! Bawr. Bawr. Stretterhawl?’

The Earthman's condescending presumptuousness is shown as he explains his location in the solar system to the alien, in a manner reminiscent of a young child's first science lesson:

'This a little plastic model  
of the solar system, with working parts.  
You are here and we are there and we  
are now here with you, is this clear?'

Simple language and the repetition of the words 'and', 'we' and 'you' contribute to the patronising tone.

However, the Mercurian displays an ability to take on a foreign language which far outstrips that of his 'superior' visitor and Morgan uses sound and punctuation to convey his contempt:

'Glawp men! Gawrbenner menko! Menhawl?'

The Mercurian directs the crossover of the two languages by forcing the Earthman to adopt his language:

'I am the yuleeda. You see my hands,  
we carry no benner, we come in peace.  
The spaceways are all stretterhawn.'

In a twist at the end of the poem, the Mercurian, in impeccable English, directs the Earthman to return to his planet:

'No. You must go back to your planet.  
Go back in peace, take what you have gained  
but quickly.'

while the self importance of the Earthman (ironically now fluent in Mercurian) has been dissolved:

'- Stretterworra gawl, gawl ...'

The poem closes with the Mercurian explaining the importance of change to his now wiser visitor:

'... nothing is ever the same,  
now is it? You'll remember Mercury.'

*The First Men on Mercury* highlights the folly of being condescending towards other cultures. The astronaut, with his perfect English, reflects the imperialist sense of cultural superiority. The humour of the poem comes from Mercurians' ability to manipulate and redirect language in order to outwit (and therefore gain power over) the pompous Earthmen.

## **In Sobieski's Shield**

*In Sobieski's Shield* is based on the idea (familiar to followers of 'Star Trek') that it is possible to transport a person through space by means of dematerialisation at source and rematerialisation at one's destination. The poet uses this idea to explore his ideas on the relationship between the past and the present, the indomitability of mankind's spirit and the importance of change.

The poem is narrated in the first person with the poet adopting the persona of a man who, along with his wife and son, has been beamed through space and rematerialized 'on a minor planet/ of a sun in Sobieski's Shield'. The absence of any punctuation and the use of blank verse contribute to the informal tone which involves the reader from the start and presents the incredible as a matter of fact. This also has the effect of invoking sympathy for the man and his situation.

The opening lines establish the fact that the man was transported from the earth 'the day before solar withdrawal' and that those who were left behind were frozen. There had been those who had warned of this catastrophe but we are told of the futility of their complacency:

'well the prophets were dancing in the end much  
good it did them'

The man accepts the inevitability of change as they are rematerialized:

'... in our right mind I hope  
approximately though not unshaken and admittedly  
not precisely those who set out'

and we learn of his uncertainty about the effects of the process of 'molecular reconstitution':

'... I wouldn't have been  
utterly surprised if some of us had turned out  
mice or worse'.

The second verse opens with the man comparing the journey to one of birth or death, images which are continued throughout the rest of the poem. We learn of the physical changes that the man and his wife undergo. The man's left hand has only four fingers and he has 'a sharp twinge' in his knee. There is a heart shaped mark on his forearm which the man 'almost' describes as a 'birthmark' and continues 'so it is in a sense', developing the idea that what the man is experiencing can be likened to a form of rebirth. His wife:

'... is hardly altered apart from that extraordinarily  
strange and beautiful crown of bright red hair'.

The bond of human love has survived the trauma and the man's tenderness for his wife is clear as she too comes through the process of rebirth:

'I draw her head into my arms and hide the sobbing  
shuddering first breaths of her second life'

We are given a sense of their fear and vulnerability:

'... we are huddled now in our  
protective dome ...'

This new planet, with its strange metallic quality, is depicted as bleak and unwelcoming. The 'harsh metallic plain' outside 'belches cobalt from its craters' while the sun is described as a 'white-bronze pulsing gong'.

In the third verse the man describes how the journey has affected his son. He has rematerialized with 'only one nipple' and the process has brought about the transition from boy to man:

'... his boy's  
treble has broken and at thirteen he is a man ...'

Mankind's pioneering instinct and natural curiosity are shown in the man's common sense explanation of why the family move together to the 'concave of the dome':

'... the environment after all  
has to be studied ...'

In the fourth verse as he surveys his new world with its 'alien iron hills' and lakes of mercury, the human bond between the present and the past becomes clear. The lakes of mercury trigger a vague memory of past times. The man's confusion, as he tries to make sense of his thoughts, is conveyed through the use of repetition:

'my memory of mercury seems to be confused with  
what is it blood no no mercury's not like blood  
what then what is it I'm remembering or nearly  
remembering'

The lakes kindle a memory of the rain-filled shell-holes of the First World War; he is shocked by the similarity between the new 'birthmark' on his arm and the heart-shaped tattoo on the arm of a dead soldier. The images of blood and the heart-shape reinforce the genetic links between past and present and convey the idea that humanity's determined spirit has been passed on through the ages. The man now sees that the person he is contains elements carried forward from history itself:

'the rematerialization has picked up these fragments I have  
a graft of war and ancient agony ...'

The last verse draws together the themes of the poem. Overwhelmed by his new understanding of the relationship between present and past, 'we are bound to all that lived', the man recognises 'energy' as the force driving the spirit of Mankind. The poem is critical of the prophets of doom who foretold of the extinction of the human race:

'... the jeremiahs  
who said nothing human would stand are confounded ...'

Life on Earth has been destroyed but Man's heroic determination, love and the family have survived.

The poem ends by showing the power of change to translate endings into beginnings. The metaphor:

'... the old moon's in  
the new moon's arms ...'

continues the theme of rebirth which has been present throughout the poem and contains the image of the future moving forward from the past. The 'new moon' is the controlling force. As the man prepares to leave the protection of the dome and venture forward into his new life he embodies that profound human determination to survive. His resolutely optimistic 'let's go' as he ventures out to meet the future is a contrast with 'the end' of the first line of the poem, showing that by embracing change a new beginning can be forged out of the end of the past.